

# THE SUPREME GIFT

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ARLO BATES

*Delivered at the annual meeting of the PHI  
BETA KAPPA of TUFTS COLLEGE May  
10, 1911, and now privately printed to  
serve as a Christmas Greeting to friends.*



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# The Supreme Gift

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## I

**G**IFT-BEARING cometh bounteous Life.  
She brings  
To childhood dear, unreasoning days,  
    Cadenced of angels' wings  
    Adown their sweet amaze,  
    When but to be is joy;  
To youth the prodigal she lavish flings  
Rich treasure for his wasting or employ;  
Then to the man gives power, glory, gold;  
Conquest and kingship with their pomp and pride;  
Or nobler gifts: hopes that through all abide,  
    Home's blessings manifold;  
Beauty and love, those jewels twain  
Of which the very gods are fain;  
The thrill of fatherhood, which takes man's breath  
For very awe, as if he had slain death;  
Or sorrow's sacramental cup, whose wine  
Is token of man's heritage divine.  
Unweariedly Life still bestows,  
Ungrudgingly her bounty flows:

Till oft man asks, were his the choosing,  
Were his the taking or refusing  
From all her gifts of weal or pain,  
In which he wins best good or gain.

## II

WHAT is the highest bounty Life bestows,  
Best of all gifts man's earthly being knows?  
Not joy, though all dead laughter woke  
To echo mirthfulness divine,  
With zest of youth and song and vine,  
The soul of pleasure to invoke:  
Like sparkle on a wave joy dances,  
While swift the swallowing gloom advances.  
Nor best of all is wealth, or power,  
Or fame's flame-blinding hour;  
For who with Midas-touch, or might whose stroke  
Hath humbled all mankind to bear his yoke,  
Or who that hears honor's acclaim  
Make earth reecho with his name,  
Shall this earth's richest treasure deem;  
Who for this barter all  
Of good that might befall,  
And count it of Life's gifts the gift supreme?

### III

**N**OR yet is beauty best that Life concedes.

Not beauty, though the evening star  
Through dusk of violet heavens glancing  
Broods on its pictured shape entrancing  
Where purple-black among its reeds

The pond lies smooth and far.

Not beauty, though the quickened marble keep  
Down dulling centuries the thrill it caught  
When some Hellenic hand enraptured wrought  
With godlike touch a god, and woke from sleep

The stone's imprisoned loveliness;

Not beauty, though our sense knew the caress  
Of all lost fairness of dead summer days,  
Of all hushed melody of bygone lays,  
All wonder of those women fair of old  
Who for the world itself their favor sold.

None of all these an answering pulse may waken  
When anguish numbs, or death with fingers cold  
Dear love has taken.

Sorrow may bring the pride of beauty low;  
Life's noblest gift fails not in hours of woe.

### IV

**A**ND love, enkindling love, which bards have sung  
Till down the ages swells the song,—

Though neither lute, nor string, nor tongue,  
But does love's worth most grievous wrong;  
For love alone when Paradise was lost  
Could man live on, enduring all life cost;—  
For love alone an exile's pain prolong.

Prisoned in consciousness, the soul must dwell  
Shut in forever, and its solitude

May none partake; only love to its cell  
May softly steal, and call in murmuring tone,  
And yearning brood

Till it forgets its prison lone.

Divine is love, a gift so passing great  
It challenges the ruthless might of fate:  
Yet more than love is that which makes love good,—

The impulse to be worthy, the desire  
To rise to heights ideal; to aspire  
To some high possible, half understood,  
There with hands stainless to lift up,  
There with pure lips, cleansed as with fire,  
To drink with love the sacramental cup.

Divine is love, yet is that guerdon best  
Whose worth ennobles all the rest.

V

**N**OR yet is knowledge the most royal gem  
Man wears in his soul's anadem.

The wisest mage  
On mysteries of the ages pouring,  
Nature's most secret deeps exploring,  
For all his yearning sage  
Finds not the secret clue  
Which shall interpret Fate's dread page.  
Time's vast hour through  
The earth flees down the void, nor yet outspeeds  
The star-emblazoned riddle which transcends  
All human lore; which dulls man's wistful creeds  
With doubt which never ends.  
All space  
Flames with the questions "What?" and "Why?"  
While Wisdom veils her face,  
And silent in her place  
Hath no reply.

## VI

**Y**ET facing that dread, star-writ scroll,  
Man may not wholly yield to fear.  
Stronger than doubt, within his soul  
One impulse burns with radiance clear:  
A quenchless longing for immortal good;  
A quick desire for goal yet unattained;  
One passion deathless, howsoe'er withstood;

One striving holy, howsoe'er profaned;  
One inly urge that pricks man on to grow,  
As springs the lotus from Nilotic slime  
Through topaz floods toward golden sun to climb  
And bloom in chaliced snow.

VII.

**T**IME wastes like lapsing wave;  
And 'now' so soon is 'then';  
Like wind-flowers fading on a grave,  
The ways, the wars, the woes of men  
Begin and end in naught.  
Only change may abide;  
The famed are the forgotten; man's pride  
Breaks like a bubble; man's thought  
Blooms, like the rose, only on dust of death.  
Yet though all else should fail,  
Glory dissolve like breath,  
Strength prove of no avail,  
Love before sorrow pale;  
Though life be base or all disconsolate,  
Never is wholly lost that inward fire:  
Lives in the heart some flame, some spark innate,  
In changing shapes,—now hope and now desire,  
Now faith with ecstasy illuminate,  
Now courage death to dare;

If bright or dimmed in its degree,  
Faint, darkened, wavering though it be,  
This of the soul of all things is man's share,—  
Boon best beyond compare.

VIII.

**F**OR proved is manhood's worth  
Not by the things of earth,  
Not by the laurel to the victor given;  
His is the hero-soul,  
Though he reach not the goal,  
Who hath most nobly in the contest striven.  
Though fate to him no wreath assign,  
Though swift oblivion will make men forget  
The name upon his tombstone set.  
One prize pure from all stain  
His manhood may attain,—  
Still to aspire in discontent divine.

IX.

**F**OR the spirit of man should be flame,  
That must mount, that must leap,—if from shame  
Of the pyre of outcast unclean  
Supplicating the far blue serene;  
Or if storm-torn on sentinel-height  
It torch tidings of fear down the night;

Or if watched by pale vestals at prayer  
Vows ecstatic it heavenward bear;—  
Still starward upspringing in might.  
So the spirit of man must aspire  
Still to rise, still to soar, still to burn;  
Like the tongues Pentecostal in fire  
Unceasingly upward to yearn.

X

**T**HIS mighty longing frees man from the thrall  
Of time and sense, and makes him lord of all.  
This was the germ which stirred primeval dust,  
Immortal still, although to ruin fall  
The constellations in their march august.  
Older this aspiration than hoar time;  
Young will it be when time hath been forgot:  
When broken is that dream of God sublime  
Men call the universe, and earth is not,  
This flame unquenchable shall still endure,  
Creation's essence pure.  
While man is man his heart should be  
An altar consecrate on which it glows.  
All else may fail; unto eternity  
This radiance supreme no wasting knows.  
This, Life's best gift, shall make secure  
Against all malice of assailing Fate,  
Man's selfhood dauntless and inviolate!









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